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The term "gatekeeper" appears often in the endless debate over health care. It's generally employed to describe a bureaucrat who decides what sort of care a patient will receive. But the other day I listened as a public-spirited citizen invoked the spirit of the ultimate gatekeeper: St. Peter.

"In the last five years of life, just shoot 'em," this guy proposed.

That got a good laugh from the several hundred people who attended a town-hall meeting on health care in Toms River hosted by U.S. Rep. John Adler (D-3d Dist.). But upon further reflection, I realized that this may have represented the first, and probably the last, time a sitting congressman will hear someone enunciate an approach to health-care reform that is guaranteed to lower costs. All of the other plans have major flaws that would lead to increased rather than decreased health care costs, including the Democratic plan now before the House.

Another citizen who got a hold of the microphone, for example, proposed extending the federal Medicare system to everyone. This, she said, would save \$380 billion. In fact it would just hasten the bankruptcy of Medicare, which is on target to go broke within the decade.

That speaker's views were in contrast to those of most of the attendees at the hearing. The majority had a healthy skepticism about health care reform. Many booed any mention of more government involvement. Whenever Adler evinced any sympathy for the efforts of his fellow House Democrats to pass a national health care plan, he was met with hoots and hollers.

Ocean County is a conservative place. On Saturday, I attended one of those tea parties in Jackson during which speaker after speaker lit into the three Republican congressmen from New Jersey who had supported that cap-and-trade bill that passed the House last week by a small margin. The tea partiers were ready to recall them all.

When I spoke to Adler before the hearing, I assumed that as a Democrat he had been spared the wrath of the right wing for his positive vote on cap-and-trade. That was not the case. He told

me that on a visit to Ocean County a few days prior he had been nearly attacked by a cluster of concerned citizens. One lady actually gave him a shove, he said.

Such are the perils of public office. Once the hearing began, Adler stood up well to the challenge. His district stretches all the way west to encompass his home town of Cherry Hill, where he no doubt finds a more liberal audience. But the reaction from the Toms River crowd, I suspect, will make him think twice about voting the same way on health care as he did on cap-and-trade.

Both bills face the same problem: The goal is unachievable and obscure while the costs are concrete and obvious. In the case of the cap-and-trade bill, the goal is influencing the planet's climate for the better. Such influence can't be measured by the voters. But the costs in higher utility bills can. When it comes to health care reform, the goal is perhaps even loftier. The problem the pols face, so succinctly if cynically summed up by that older gentleman, is that Americans expect their health care system to deliver something close to immortality. But they don't want to pay for it.

Neither party wishes to address this problem. Later that day, I was listening to a radio talk show as I drove. Sen. Jim DeMint of South Carolina was giving the Republican Party line on health care reform. Americans want to keep their private insurance providers, the Republican said. So far, so good. But DeMint then went on to assert that the government has no business telling a 70-year-old woman whether she should get a hip replacement.

Wait a minute. If that woman is 70, she's on Medicare, not private insurance. Was DeMint asserting that the government has no business telling the government what to do? He was indeed. When I got home and read up on DeMint's positions, I found he derides "countries with government-controlled care" while arguing in favor of having our government-controlled system that provides expensive operations for retirees to be funded out of the payroll tax of younger workers.

Nutty as that is, DeMint is, in fact, one of the saner members of his party when it comes to health care reform. But if even the Republicans are going to endorse the notion that Americans can have all the health care they want while sticking someone else with the bill, the most expensive health care system in the world will just get more expensive.

That old guy in the crowd might have been exaggerating for effect, but there has to be some sort of gatekeeper this side of the Pearly Gates. Otherwise our economy's going to go to hell in a handbasket.